

## Chapter Ten

### *One Step Forward, One Step Back*: Resisting the Forensic Turn

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#### **Abstract:**

*Conceived and directed by Tristan Sharps, dreamthinkspeak's One Step Forward, One Step Back occupied Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral for a month in 2008, running in acerbic counterpoint to the culmination of The Paradise Project—the vast shopping area now known as Liverpool One. As in many other immersive, promenade works, we are cast as detective-participants following (what I call) a 'story-trail' of clues. While the story-trails that we follow in the work of Punchdrunk are well documented, there has been little theorization of the forensic methodology from which these story-trails spring. To culturally and comparatively contextualize the work of dreamthinkspeak and Punchdrunk, I apply and interrogate Marie-Laure Ryan's paradigm of 'epistemic immersion' (deriving from her virtual-reality game theory), Lindsay Steenberg's paradigm of the forensic aesthetic manifest in American popular culture, and Janet Marstine's conception of 'the new museum' in which found, buried and imagined objects are brought to life through viscerally participatory, simulational experiences. In each of these paradigms, the interactive, multi-media mystery-story emerges as the prototypical manifestation of a forensic turn—a cultural turn that can be defined as an 'all-deducing' way of looking at the world in which 'evidence is the nexus of meaning'. Whereas Punchdrunk strive to blur illusion and reality and continually promise access to evidence, One Step Forward interrogates this blurring and promising. Newspaper reviews focus (enthusiastically) on Sharps's vision, failing to address the ways that the piece consistently interrupts and troubles vision. I highlight the lacunae—gaps in the event's establishing of a convincing world—that are crucial to the impact of the piece. These lacunae exert palpable jolts in which we our own searching is reflected back at us, disrupting the forensic aesthetic that underpins most story-trail performances.*

Contemporary life affords precious little time and space in which to reflect. Yet even those participatory performances which cast themselves as an escape from or suspension of the buzz and whirr of contemporary life tend to stint on the provision of time and space for genuine reflection. Being invited to handle props, being asked to speak, being intimately addressed in front of strangers—all common occurrences

within participatory performance these days—leaves little opportunity to digest what is happening.<sup>1</sup> As Sophie Nield puts it: ‘you are using the headspace you would normally be using to analyse and engage with the signs on stage to work out the logistics of just spectating’.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, I am going to argue for the value of lacunae. Lacunae, as I use the term here, are gaps within a participatory performance event, holes in the event’s establishing of a convincing world. These gaps may be accidental—occurring by chance or due to unforeseen consequences of an event’s design—or may deliberately be built in by the makers of the event. My argument runs consciously against the grain of much twenty-first century discourse about participatory performance, which has been about the potential social and ethical value of becoming part of the action, and about the personally empowering attractions of immersive interactivity. The promenade, immersive performance by dreamthinkspeak at the centre of my discussion is more than just an illustration or example: *One Step Forward, One Step Back* is, I will suggest, far-reachingly argumentative in itself. It is a performance full of lacunae that bring into view the terms of engagement which propel, but are usually hidden within, most works of promenade, immersive performance.

*One Step Forward, One Step Back* was enthusiastically received by national newspaper critics. It was selected by Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph* as one of

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<sup>1</sup> I echo here comments made by Julian Maynard Smith (Artistic Director of Station House Opera) during the discussion phase of a presentation by me within a symposium (at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London) titled *Immersive Theatre Experiences*, 12 February 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Nield, ‘The Rise of the Character named Spectator’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18.4 (2008), 531-35 (p.533).

his ten best theatre experiences of 2008,<sup>3</sup> and by Susannah Clapp in *The Observer* (and *Guardian* online) as one of her ten.<sup>4</sup> *The Guardian*'s Lyn Gardner closed her review by stating: 'the journey takes about an hour; it will sustain you for a lifetime.'<sup>5</sup> All three reviewers focus on the boldness of (Artistic Director) Tristan Sharps' vision. What they almost entirely neglect to mention, however, are the ambiguities, collisions and interruptions to vision, that, I will argue, are crucial to the performance's impact on the participant and to its cultural significance.

If you are one of those who sighed a little when I used the word 'immersive', perhaps thinking to yourself that immersive theatre has had its day, two contrasting pieces by Gardner chime with that reaction. A 2007 review of Punchdrunk's groundbreaking collaboration with Battersea Arts Centre, *Masque of the Red Death*, captures and reflects her excitement about what she heralds not only as a significant new production but a significant new *kind* of production. She lauds the fact that this form 'gives you the chance to be both participant and spectator.' By 2014, Gardner seems to be feeling a seven-year-itch in her love affair with the form. Complaining that there is a glut of work tenuously claiming to be 'immersive' when it is not, Punchdrunk are

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Ten best theatre nights of the year 2008', *The Telegraph*, 17 December 2008 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/3814366/Ten-best-theatre-nights-of-the-year-2008>> [accessed 7 February 2015]

<sup>4</sup> Susannah Clapp, 'Donmar is a credit to the British stage', *The Guardian*, 14 December 2008 <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/14/2008-in-theatre>> [accessed 9 February 2015]

<sup>5</sup> Lyn Gardner, 'One Step Forward, One Step Back review', *The Guardian*, 12 February 2008 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/apr/12/theatre.europeancapitalofculture2008>> [accessed 7 February 2015]

cited as one of the few companies who she sees as having delivered on the promise of the immersive boom by offering spectator's 'genuine agency'. I mention Gardner's pieces not only because they bookend a widespread perception of the waxing and waning of the immersive, but also because they highlight the strong association of participatory performance with 'agency', and of both (agency and participatory performance) with the ambitious adaptation of buildings for a choose-your-own-path experience made famous by, and most associated with, Punchdrunk. It is this discursive linkage of agency, participation, and interactive, site-appropriating promenade that dreamthinkspeak, and I, want to interrogate.

Since their formation in 1999, a year before Punchdrunk, dreamthinkspeak's work has also often involved the ambitious inhabiting of large buildings for invocations of classic texts in which the spectator is cast in detective mode, mining for clues of a narrative or (if they prefer) surveying the scene in a more meandering fashion. In assessing the extent to which this brand of story-trail performance empowers the participant, most critics have focussed either on the sensory (as Josephine Machon does) or (as Adam Alston does) on the entrepreneurial dimensions of the experiences on offer.<sup>6</sup> Machon argues that immersive forms of *communitas* 'defamiliarise the familiar to transcend experience';<sup>7</sup> Alston finds Punchdrunk's collaboration with large corporations, including their willingness to produce

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<sup>6</sup> See Machon's *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and Alston's essays, the most frequently cited of which is: 'Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre', *Performance Research*, 18.2 (June 2013), 128-38.

<sup>7</sup> Machon (2013), p. 38.

advertainment shows explicitly promoting brands, problematically complicit with an experience economy which he wants theatre to transcend. Both these lines of enquiry presume a desire for theatre to rise above the culture within which it is produced. In contrast, my aim is to usher into the debate about participation a fuller consideration of the ways in which theatre *fuels* other domains of culture *and vice versa*.

### Participatory Performance and the Forensic Turn

Contemporary theatre, like all of contemporary culture, is obsessed with the detection, verification and display of information. This can be seen in the steady shift from ideologically to statistically-driven policy-making, and in the credibility invested in evidence-based approaches in everything from teacher-training to architectural theory to the evaluation of happiness.<sup>8</sup> In these and many other contexts, truth is figured forensically—that is, using approaches that invoke and adapt forensic science. Thomas Keenan (whose work focusses on photojournalism and the staging of evidence in trials), Eyal Weizman (a leading figure in forensic architecture, a field concerned with the role of architectural practice and analysis in relation to human rights) and Allan Sekula (a maker of performances and films, as well as a renowned media and political theorist) are amongst those across various disciplines who have identified the emergence of a forensic gaze, manifest in a forensic aesthetics. In their short but important book, *Mengele's Skull*, Keenan and Weizman identify the 1985

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<sup>8</sup> The emergence of a forensic approach to the perception of emotions is charted by Oliver Burkeman in an essay entitled 'Science of Happiness': <<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/may/07/science-of-happiness-oliver-burkeman>> [accessed 10 October 2014]. For accounts of the emerging dominance of evidence-based approaches to teaching, see Geoff Petty (ed.) *Evidence-Based Teaching: a practical approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009.

'trial' of Josef Mengele (the physician who selected victims for the Auschwitz gas chambers and performed experiments on prisoners) as the dawn of a forensic aesthetics. Whereas the 1961 Eichmann trial placed survivor testimony centrestage as a reaction against the primacy of documents and exclusion of witness accounts in the Nuremburg trials, the need to identify an exhumed skull as Mengele's engendered new forms of superimposition in which images of the living subject were, with the help of the forensic team's theatrical presentation strategies, used to bring the dead to apparent life. These strategies, as Keenan and Weizman detail, instrumentalise the forensic turn's all-deducing approach to truth.<sup>9</sup>

Lindsay Steenberg's study of the application of forensic science in contemporary American popular culture is a book that has much to offer discourse around participatory performance.<sup>10</sup> As Steenberg asserts, an archival, museological drive fuels the forensic turn, an impulse to 'collect, order and display with the intention of creating a clearer picture of the world and demonstrating the owner's superior understanding of it'.<sup>11</sup> A coupling of the nostalgic with the hyper-modern, the archival drive of the forensic is in many ways a return to Enlightenment humanism that 'elides the controversies, anxieties and inconsistencies circulating [...] in postmodernity'.<sup>12</sup> But its nostalgia is augmented by a postmodern propensity for simulations that

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Lindsay Steenberg, *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Steenberg, p.16.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

animate rather than merely display. These simulations that animate rather than merely display, blurring illusion and reality, are the paradigmatic mode of participation in what is widely referred to as ‘the new museum’ and its kissing cousin, the story-trail immersive. Within both the new museum and the story-trail immersive, the sensation of access to evidence afforded to the viewer-turned-participant is heightened by hands-on, interactive, multimedia design features. Through these features, which bring ‘dead’ objects and texts back to life, the promise of the archive is itself resurrected.

In a video interview for New York-based, networking thinktank FoST (Future of Storytelling) filmed in September, 2013, Felix Barrett opposes Punchdrunk’s immersive theatre, which he lauds as a sensory, haptic experience fostering agency in contrast to the ‘traditional theatregoing experience’ which he denigrates as a disembodied, passivity-inducing spectacle ‘that’s utterly formulaic’. Just as immersive theatre is constructed as dynamic and progressive, in opposition to traditional theatre, positioned as retrograde, the new museum (as Nick Prior outlines)<sup>13</sup> casts the traditional museum as a mausoleum, a stifling repository of dead culture.<sup>14</sup> Though the intricacies of the relationship between theatre and

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<sup>13</sup> Nick Prior, ‘Postmodern Restructurings’ in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. by Sharon Macdonald (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), pp.509-524.

<sup>14</sup> The museum-as-mausoleum motif is central to George C. Wolfe’s iconoclastic (and now, ironically, canonical) 1986 satire *The Colored Museum*. Satirising not only realist classics such as Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, but experimental/avant-garde work such as Ntozake Shange’s neo-Brechtian feminist choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is not enuf*, Wolfe insists that all forms of text are stifling if we regard them as sacred objects.

museums is complex and contested, there is (as both Susan Bennett and Scott Magelssen observe) general agreement that museums have taken a theatrical turn ‘offering exhibits and experiences that equip visitors with learning and invite them to step into roles that require real-time choices based on that learning’—learning that has ‘become less about the objects and more about the experience’.<sup>15</sup> The Jurassic Park-style museum-as-theme park allows visitors to get viscerally close to material objects and allows curators to commodify visitor experience. The example on which Steenberg focusses is a role-playing exhibit that is an offshoot of the (much franchised) television phenomenon, *CSI*:

The key words appearing consistently across the marketing for *CSI: The Experience* include: immersive, interactive, hands-on, multi-media, and, of course, experience. The experience being offered here is one of role-play and the exhibit frequently addresses its participants directly [...] Even if these experiences are mass-produced simulations, they are always unique to the player/participant. Thus, the aura that might be lost from the postmodern artefact can perhaps paradoxically be found in the postmodern simulational experience.<sup>16</sup>

The impulse to restore materiality to discovery fuels the ‘postmodern simulational experience’ afforded by Punchdrunk in similarly paradoxical ways.

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<sup>15</sup> Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), pp. 78-79. Susan Bennett, *Theatre & Museums* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Steenberg, p.141.



As Michael Billington observes in his review of *The Drowned Man* (2013),<sup>17</sup> the fundamental mode of Punchdrunk performance is 'simulation' that seeks to 'blur the border between illusion and reality'. For the 2011 (New York) incarnation of their *Macbeth* adaptation, *Sleep No More*, the company went to even greater lengths to blur reality and illusion by making the McKittrick, an invented hotel, seem like a real hotel derelict since the outbreak of World War II. They created websites to 'document' the mythological cachet of the McKittrick arising from its use in filming by Alfred Hitchcock. This cachet is extended within the performance event, which 'restores' the (invented) McKittrick as a multi-storey cabinet of curiosities stuffed to the nines with what might be the most numerous and diverse collection of found objects to furnish any piece of performance in history. Though the idea is that these objects derive from previous eras of the Hotel's life, they were actually bought in flea markets to create a set that is a kind of *Wunderkammer*.

Steenberg identifies the *Wunderkammer*, privately-owned museums that became fashionable in the sixteenth-century, as prototypical manifestations of the contemporary forensic aesthetics. Revelling in the exotic aura of found objects, the *Wunderkammers* are privately-owned cabinets of curiosities in which the real and the fake, the made and the organic, are dizzily juxtaposed. Whereas the nineteenth-century museum strives for arrangement, often through taxonomy, the *Wunderkammer* makes 'no distinction between the mythical, the cultural and the natural.'<sup>18</sup> In Punchdrunk's forensic story-trails we see, as Steenberg suggests, a

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable—review', 17 July 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jul/17/drowned-man-hollywood-fable-review>> [accessed 15 June 2015]

<sup>18</sup> Steenberg, p.126.

return to the former augmented by a postmodern propensity for simulations that confuse mythical, cultural and natural.

The blurring of illusion and reality within simulations that fetishize the encounter with evidence informs the design of *OSF*, as it does the design of *Masque of the Red Death*, *The Drowned Man*, and *Sleep No More*. But while these Punchdrunk shows wrap participants *within* a forensic aesthetic, *OSF* deploys various kinds of lacunae to open a space between participant and aesthetic, a space for reflection on and resistance to forensic logic. In this way, *OSF* offers an encounter with uncertainty, with not knowing. Instead of making us feel a sense of superior understanding in accordance with forensic logic, *OSF* creates spaces of *unknowing* that make us conscious of the desires and assumptions we bring to our performance of participation here and elsewhere.

### *One Step Forward, One Step Back*

*One Step Forward, One Step Back* inhabited the vast interior of Liverpool Cathedral during the post-Easter period of the year in which the city was European Capital of Culture. 2008 was the peak of the enormous wave of regeneration that transformed central Liverpool, and which saw the demolition of some listed buildings. A show, as I will detail, that interweaves motifs of spiritual and commercial aspiration, *OSF* opened at the same time as The Paradise Project was being completed. Now called Liverpool One, the Paradise Project gave the city-centre a makeover featuring giant, shiny new shopping complexes. Paradise is not exactly 'lost' for Tristan Sharps in the show he created for this cultural moment, but it is a concept that he wants to

rescue from the rhetoric of property development. It is through lacunae, gaps in the fugue of progression in which we are made to step out of and back in time, that we experience the epistemic jolt of seeing the terms of our participation laid bare. I will argue that, while Punchdrunk prick our appetite with the promise of access, encouraging us to forget ourselves, dreamthinkspeak want us to re-member the relationship of participation to cultural memory and ask: what are we searching for, what propels that search, and what do our searches leave behind?

In the waiting area just inside the imposing arched entrance to the Cathedral, we are grouped into three- or four-strong mini-audiences. Each group's first encounter is with a gentleman in Victorian attire who reads with passion the William Blake poem 'Jerusalem'<sup>19</sup>—until he stops, turns to us aghast, and shows us his book. 'The words, the words are falling off the page!' As he ushers us out in some distress, we are stopped in our tracks by an extraordinary reveal. In a *trompe l'oeil* enhanced by cunning use of a projector, the ceiling disappears and overhead wheel trolleys pushed by shoppers in a busy supermarket. The shoppers are oblivious to the other drama below. Our bibliophilic gentleman bustles us out toward a door along a dark corridor. We wait.

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<sup>19</sup> The anthemic 'Jerusalem' originates from the Preface to Blake's epic poem, *Milton*, first published in 1808. It reads: 'And did those feet in ancient time|Walk upon England's mountains green:|And was the holy Lamb of God,|On England's pleasant pastures seen!|And did the Countenance Divine,|Shine forth upon our clouded hills?|And was Jerusalem builded here,|Among these dark Satanic Mills?|Bring me my Bow of burning gold;|Bring me my Arrows of desire:|Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!|Bring me my Chariot of fire!|I will not cease from Mental Fight,|Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:|Till we have built Jerusalem,|In England's green & pleasant Land.' William Blake, *Milton*, (Boulder: Shambhala Press, 1978), p.62.



Figure 1: Shoppers overhead. Photograph by Lois Maskell (Set Designer). Concept and Artistic Direction by Tristan Sharps.

Someone may knock on the door, or, after a while, the door will slowly and slightly open. Peeking inside, we can see a polygonal room. Facing each wall is a red-suited figure. Huddling over portable heaters, the red figures tap away at identical computer terminals in doleful unison. After a while, shyly at first, they start to look round at us. Eventually, we are being stared down by a battalion of bedraggled Santa Clauses. Pausing from their weary typing of (what the more inquisitive observers will detect to be) shopping lists, the Santas seem faintly sheepish at first, then increasingly ashamed. The scene reads as a sardonic betrayal of the magic of Christmas.



Figure 2: Bedraggled Santas. Photograph by Lois Maskell (Set Designer). Concept and Artistic Direction by Tristan Sharps.

The soulless input of the lists seems to counterpoint the words of *Jerusalem* falling off the page in the opening scene, perhaps signalling an enslavement of language to mechanical labour. As these thoughts float around in my head, I am entreated to move on. If observers do not leave this scene quickly, the Santas will become increasingly agitated, their faces becoming as red as their suits; it is clearly not something they want us to witness. They point us further down the corridor.

We make our way to a similarly shaped and proportioned, oddly polygonal room. This one, however, is literally and metaphorically warmer, lovingly furnished in rich, polished woods. Instead of the portable heaters and soulless PCs, there are floor-to-ceiling bookshelves brimming with hardbound books. Two more Victorian gentlemen (referred to by Sharps in an interview as 'failed philosophers') are labouring to piece *Jerusalem* back together, each word a fragment of paper that they move around like a jigsaw. Shortly after, we see their companion, the bibliophile figure from the opening scene. Alone by a lamp, he has few words now and seems unable to engage, gesturing more desperately now for us to move on. The room darkens to cue our exit, but as we are leaving a scene of trolley-pushing shoppers again appears over our heads; this time they are in a park, cherry blossom falling around them like snow. This shopping snow-scene fades out, and the supermarket from the first scene re-appears; except now we are directly below a checkout counter. Pausing momentarily from the production-line repetition of scanning, the checker peers down at us: it is one of the Santas. The philosopher exhorts us to keep moving.

What unites the otherwise oppositional characters (the philosophers and the Santas) is that they collectively point us ever on, ever upward. The effect of this continual pointing upward and onward is disconcerting and palpably paradoxical, clashing with the continual exhortations to pause, to reflect, to take time out and step back. Our journey echoes the poet's epic, allegorical ascent to Heaven in a text which Sharps cites as a key inspiration for *OSF*: Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As in the *Divine Comedy*, the focus on guidance is married to a sense of epistemological crisis. Like Dante's, our journey is a comedic but profoundly soul-searching journey one in which we reflects on our own agency. While Dante is guided through Hell by an ancient—the Roman poet, Virgil—we have the philosophers. Through Heaven, Dante is guided by Beatrice, the ideal woman and muse, inspired by a real woman he met in his younger days. Our Beatrice is a similarly worldly and other-worldly presence. After a steady upward journey, we suddenly realize how far we have ascended as we look down hundreds of feet to see a figure in the brightest of blue dresses, a distant yet dazzling vision against the expanse of ochre. She glides a celestial, arcing path toward the altar, turns to us with angelic calm and points skyward before arcing back toward and beneath us, disappearing from view.<sup>20</sup> While there are many moments in *OSF* that makes us stop and think, these are mostly sardonic in tone. The appearance of the Beatrice figure is a different kind of epiphany. After all the cautionary moments, this is a surprisingly joyous and magical, dream-like one. It is perhaps designed to remind us of the power of wonder. Sharps wants us to dream,

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<sup>20</sup> There were actually three actresses playing the Beatrice role, working in a loop so that one was always in view of the audience as each slowly describes their arc. I thank Chris Tomlinson, who was Assistant Director to Sharps, for detailing this and other logistical aspects.



but, as the final phase of the show will demonstrate, he wants us to reflect on our dreams.

Finally, we ascend the bell-tower (one of the world's largest and highest) to reach the heaviest, functioning ringing-bells on the planet. Now, though, their ring is eerily silent, as if we have become deaf to their toll. Finally, we are out on the roof, 300 feet above the city. There are tourist-style, binocular telescopes promising a better view, vision beyond the cranes. But these ones are trained on particular windows in a building a few hundred feet away. In two of the rooms within the building, we see a library, and what looks like our philosophers, one gazing back at us, the other engaged in quiet study. In another window, we see our Santa Clauses working flat out to wrap and label our presents.

Charlie Dickinson, who played the bibliophile of the opening scene in many performances of the show, offered cogent observations about guidance thematically and about Sharps's guidance to the actors in rehearsal:

The philosophers are searching for knowledge; other more potent minds have seduced them but not given them the full picture. Tristan's interested in the spiritual guides—Milton, Blake and Dante. What links them is love. And the understanding that comes with love. The philosophers don't get this as they are experiencing it second hand.

Dickinson's interpretation is worth underlining: the philosophers are in thrall to 'second hand experience' because 'other more potent minds have seduced them but



not given them the full picture'. The idea that 'what links them is love' might seem hazily sentimental, but I read 'love' here to mean that which is beyond the evidential. It means building an understanding of oneself over time and through genuine dialogue with everything one encounters culturally. This, I will argue, could not be further from the forensic logic that aligns interaction with immediate, visceral, spectacular, interactive experience in which the participant surrenders their awareness of themselves.

### Search Warrant

The experiences facilitated by both dreamthinkspeak and Punchdrunk—offering different kinds and levels of engagement that some participants process with one another outside the event through social media—have often been described as being more akin to videogaming than to watching a play in a theatre. In 2009, intermediality theorist Marie-Laure Ryan felt the need to add a new facet to her influential typology of the kinds of immersion operative within videogaming. Previously, she had conceived three kinds: spatial, temporal, and emotional. Now, she added the epistemic, which isolates as a form of immersion the participant's search for knowledge. Ryan states that the 'prototypical manifestation of epistemic immersion—the desire to know—is the mystery story. The player impersonates the detective and investigates the case through the standard repertory of computer game actions: moving the avatar through the game world, picking up tell-tale objects, and extracting information.' As Rosemary Klich testifies, many participants report moving through Punchdrunk pieces something like an 'avatar' and 'picking up tell-

tale objects' as they seek to 'extract information'.<sup>21</sup> Klich identifies herself as one of these participants, stating that the 'notion of epistemic immersion particularly resonates with my experience of adventuring through *Masque of the Red Death*, hunting clues to the "hidden story" I had read about beforehand online, or trying to make sense of postcards, drawings and photographs dispersed across different rooms and levels in *The Drowned Man*.' She cites Colette Gordon's pithy observation that 'audience members proceed as if issued with a search warrant.'<sup>22</sup>

To Ryan's notion of epistemic immersion I would add the caveat that, for epistemic immersion to take place, the participant must be allowed to disappear, to lose themselves in their investigation. Punchdrunk's Artistic Director, Felix Barrett, states that if 'ever an audience becomes aware of themselves as audience, then we've probably slightly failed.'<sup>23</sup> Measures taken to help achieve this include the Punchdrunk mask. Experienced by many participants as anonymizing and disinhibiting, the mask engenders a degree of disappearance; a further degree is engendered by the darkness of many story-trail performance environments (including Punchdrunk's). Another measure taken is that, in many immersive events (again including Punchdrunk's), we are given a set of rules before we begin about what we are and are not allowed to do. These rules are issued in writing, by a performer/facilitator in front of us, or by a voice over a loudspeaker. Such inductions

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<sup>21</sup> Rosemary Klich, 'Playing a Punchdrunk Game: Immersive Theatre and Videogaming', *Framing Immersive Theatre and Performance: The Politics of Participation*, ed. by James Frieze (Palgrave Macmillan; forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> Gordon qtd. by Klich.

<sup>23</sup> Barrett qtd in Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, p.161.

tend to give me the feeling that there is a desire on the part of the facilitators to get the pragmatics over with, so that pragmatic problems do not interfere with our sense of escape.

All of these measures attest to Barrett's desire to 'keep the lid closed so no light from the real world enters in, figuratively or literally!'<sup>24</sup> Once sealed, there is little guidance for the promenading participant. The mystery story, in these conditions, is experienced as a fugue: a trail of cryptic revelations that spur us on to know more, maintaining our desire to reach a higher level access without it ever being entirely clear what we are accessing. A sense of access promised and endlessly deferred is essential to the stimulation of desire for knowledge that fuels epistemic immersion. Articulating the particular sense of fugue engendered by the internet age, Miranda July wryly observes: 'We haunt ourselves, googling our own name, perpetually clicking on search—because if we're always searching then we never have to notice that we've found it, we're there, this is really it.' The haunted promise of continually deferred access to something secret, something hinted at and rumoured, is crucial to what is in several respects—including global impact and commercial success—the apotheosis of Punchdrunk's work and of immersive theatre production as both live event and internet sensation, *Sleep No More*. Bill Worthen details these secrets just out of reach, including the elusive carrot of 'access to the fabled sixth floor' of the fictional McKittrick Hotel in which the event takes place.<sup>25</sup> This privilege and others,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> W.B. Worthen, 'The Written Troubles of the Brain: *Sleep No More* and the Space for Character', *Theatre Journal* 64.1 (2012), pp.79-97 (p.95).

such as rare and apparently individually tailored one-to-one performances, are mythologised by blogs and fan sites that extend the event. Drawing on testimony from fellow participants, Worthen conveys how the sense of the occasional one-to-ones performed to chosen spectators are perceived by many as hidden treasures.

While the opposition of Santa Clauses and shoppers to poets and philosophers is a key motif, *One Step Forward* is a story, like *Sleep No More*, in which meaning is not only enhanced but generated by the spaces through which we move. Sharps states that it was the combination of the grandiose and the secret that drew him to the Cathedral as a site for the Liverpool performance: 'you cannot fail to be struck by the sense of this huge interior space, but there are also an extraordinary number of interconnecting passageways that you don't see' on a public tour.<sup>26</sup> As well as the august, open spaces, we are indeed afforded access to confined quarters inaccessible to (ordinary) tour groups. Crucially, though, the things we find there are *in*accessible, frequently stopping us in our tracks and turning our gaze back on itself. We find ourselves in stairwells or corridors, walking over small wooden bridges to nowhere or suddenly shut in by aluminium barriers. These spaces trip us up rather than spur us on. Just as we think we are stuck, glimpses are revealed of worlds lost or buried in time. In one such apparently void space, grey snow falls as we walk across it and a wan light reveals a half-buried building shaped like a question-mark but glowing in the distinctive orange of a Sainsbury's supermarket. It feels like we have found ourselves in a Nuclear winter. By the time we reach a second

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<sup>26</sup> These comments are made in an interview with Shehani Fernando, 'Milton on Merseyside' (online video feature), *The Guardian*, 2 May 2008 <<http://www.theguardian.com/arts/video/2008/may/02/one.step.forward>> [accessed 9 February 2015].

snowscape, we find beneath us a partly-real, partly fantastic Liverpool in faded miniature, replete with what seem to be skyscrapers, high-tech shops, offices and eateries, and a cathedral. As we walk over a makeshift bridge in an eerily void passageway, a detailed outline map of Liverpool's skyline, in light that is somehow both sepia and neon, lights up beneath us then disappears as soon as we are over the bridge.

The interplay of deliberation (the evocation of a distinct world and a clear thematic opposition between consumer habits and spiritual enrichment/enlightenment) and meandering (the freedom to explore interesting, confusing spaces as we follow or fail to follow what is a narrative only a loose sense, full of gaps and intriguing ambiguities) is one that characterizes many participatory performance events. In *One Step Forward*, how we are compelled to move, and how our movement is hampered or deterred, are foregrounded in relation to the thematic tensions between static remembering/preserving and fugue-like forgetting/re-inventing. Though we enter the performance in groups of three, there is no desire on the part of the facilitators of our experience to split up (as occurs in some immersive performances)<sup>27</sup> people who come to the event together. As soon as we have left the first segment of performance, we are free to wander at whatever pace we want. Standing out against this background of freedom, the moments where we are

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<sup>27</sup> A recent example of this is Coney's *Early Days (of a better nation)*, first staged in 2014, in which we are each cast as a representative of one of three regions of a fictional country in crisis. Each region works and sits separately within the emergency parliament in which the needs of each region are negotiated in relation to the country's resources. Those who arrive at the event in pairs or groups are given cards of different colours signifying the different interest-groups, so that friends are divided across the three regions.

shepherded by the Santas and the philosopher register decisively as moments of coercion. Steady movement upward and onward provides a sense of propulsion that is cut by sudden shifts of scale and perspective and by mini-time-warps—primordial irruptions and visions of a post-apocalyptic future. While there are tropes of showing, revealing, there are equally tropes of burial (snow-covered supermarket) and disappearance (the words falling off the page, the lost city).

The participatory performances that I find most rewarding are those that put participation in crisis. Though I am focussing on Punchdrunk's brand of story-trail performance as my main point of contrapuntal reference in this essay, *many* brands of participatory performance strive to seal off the world of the event from the world outside it. This striving can produce moments in which the thinness, or fragility, of the contract that we enter into as participants of such events becomes awkwardly apparent. Richard Talbot points out the frequency of collisions between the 'play' world and the outside world in performances within the InOnTheAct Festival (Salford Quays, 2012).<sup>28</sup> Sophie Nield describes how an encounter with a monk in a show by Goat and Monkey made her uneasily aware of her 'not-mediaeval clothes' and 'not-mediaeval bright green handbag'.<sup>29</sup> While such moments are usually suppressed or scuttled around by facilitators, sometimes by improvisation that steers our attention away, ignoring them, the lacunae within *One Step Forward* seem to build *toward* such collisions of the everyday and play worlds. With its motifs of masks (like those

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Talbot, 'She Wants You to Kiss Her: Negotiating Risk in the Immersive Theatre Contract', *Framing Immersive Theatre and Performance: The Politics of Participation*, ed. by James Frieze (Palgrave Macmillan; forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> Nield, p.531.

of the Santas and the Cathedral itself) slipping, *One Step Forward* wants us to feel the thinness of the contracts that we enter into. Talbot describes how the producers of *You Once Said Yes* (Look Left, Look Right) ‘try to limit unhelpful “mis-keying” by figures out-of-the-frame: security guards; local police; actors from other shows recognised by audience members; and interruptions from members of the general public.’<sup>30</sup> Such ‘mis-keying’, in contrast, propels *One Step Forward*, which is a tissue of interruptions and collisions between perceptual frames. Our journey is defined by lacunae as much as by progression. It is through these lacunae that we realize the lessons of our quest precisely at the moment when we thought we had reached a void. This is the opposite of the strangely vacuous emphasis on stimulation and the promise of more that is intrinsic to forensic spectacle. Our egress to the roof of the Cathedral is an apparent re-emergence into the world that soon leads us back, through the doctored telescopes, to the tricks of illusion. We are actively staged as a spectacle for passers-by as we stand on the roof of the Cathedral facing in the same direction. Judging by the telephone call to which Merseyside Police responded early in the run of *OSF* reporting an imminent mass suicide attempt, the participants that night looked to someone like they were planning to jump off.

### Momentum and Regression

As its title suggests, there is a dialogue between momentum and regression in *One Step Forward, One Step Back*. The title might be a commentary or a prescription. As commentary, it suggests the need to be careful about progress, asking us to

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<sup>30</sup> Despite these efforts, an Edinburgh performance of *You Once Said Yes* ‘was halted by police as the heist scene involved a driver in a balaclava’ and ‘in Camden, a participant went off on a long walk with a non-player convinced they were an actor.’

consider what we lose in the name of regeneration dressed up as glossily futural. As prescription, it exhorts us to take a step back, to retreat and to dig, to actively revisit the products of previous generations, not to live in the past so much as take a broader, epochal view.

*One Step Forward* is the first part of what would become (rather than being pre-conceived as) a trilogy of works about regeneration. All three pieces interrogate how we carry forward or obliterate the pasts that generate our present as we try to shape the future. *One Step Forward* was followed in 2010 by *Before I Sleep*, a meditation on Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* using a derelict Co-op building in Brighton; and in 2013 came *In The Beginning Was The End*, which took place in London's Somerset House. As Brighton-based arts journalist and dreamthinkspeak buff Bella Todd notes, both of these pieces take advantage of a historical moment in which buildings with rich histories have been stripped down in readiness for renting out. Escorting Todd and her *Time Out* interview crew 'down a dark alley between Somerset House and what were the King's College science labs, Sharps points to a signpost that reads "Designated Contaminated Waste Route" and reflects that "the faster the pace of regeneration, the faster the pace of degeneration".'<sup>31</sup> As we confront the snowscapes of *OSF*, Sharps wants us to consider the value of historical knowledge in planning the future.

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<sup>31</sup> Bella Todd, 'Dreamthinkspeak's secret apocalypse', *Time Out*, 31 January 2013, <<http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/dreamthinkspeaks-secret-apocalypse>> [accessed 6 February 2015].



It is not regeneration in itself that he sees as the problem, but cultural amnesia; he is calling for an honest dialogue between the imperative for new development and the value of preservation. It is fitting that 'Jerusalem' is a poem that invokes conflicting images of regeneration. Amidst the poem's paradisiacal imagery of hope and triumph harnessed to the project of building 'Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land', the 'dark Satanic mills' bespeak the spiritual and physical horrors that are the undertow of the onward surge of industry. These same dark Satanic mills are, one might add, the kinds of space being renovated for immersive theatre events. Zealous preservers, the philosophers trying to restore the text fail because they are too cloistered. There cannot be many poems more iconic in contemporary English culture than 'Jerusalem'. Its resonance is the result of its ritual/partisan use as a hymn, a suffragette rallying-cry, a fixture at the Labour Party Conference, and at major sporting events. While Blake's writing is very powerful, the emotion that accrues from these applications of the poem in performance add to that power. Here, though, the philosophers fail to restore that power because they pick the poem apart pedantically, treating it as evidence to be restored.

The twist that develops from the opposition of the philosophers to the shoppers is that they are equally myopic. While the shoppers are addicted to the convenience of their trolley-dashing, the philosophers fail to see the bigger picture because they fail to leave their room, refusing to engage with the rapidly changing culture around them. Blake's strident short poem and Dante's deeply complex, epic poem are inspirations to Sharps because they both take an openly palimpsestic approach to the world around them, acknowledging the present while holding the past and the future in view. Mixing an idealistic view of human nature with a square-eyed sense of

cruelty and suffering, they embrace change but reject both starry-eyed nostalgia and blind modernisation.

Sharps is not the only immersive theatre-maker to use derelict buildings as sites of immersive theatre. As Gareth White observes, the kind of 'maze-like' spaces appropriated by Shunt and Punchdrunk are 'ready-made exploratory landscapes', but they are also 'redolent of other histories'.<sup>32</sup> Though the performance event is architecturally site-sympathetic, there is a (con)fusion of what is found with what is invented so that the history of the site is over-written by the event.

dreamthinkspeak's site-appropriation is conscious of the site's history and self-conscious about the work's engagement with that history. In *One Step Forward*, some of the Cathedral's glass, display cases containing Bibles, robes and regalia are strategically highlighted to evoke the efforts to preserve and inspire through the building of tradition—laying down cultural and spiritual roots. Others are cannily and uncannily transformed—one becoming a block of flats, minute scenes of contemporary life just perceptible through the tiny windows.

Reconstruction and deconstruction are the forensic expert's means of processing evidence. Encountering a scene, the forensic investigator peels back layers that obscure the truth, imagining how the scene came to be in the state that s/he finds it. In this way, s/he builds a picture of what created the scene and why. While the reader-agent of immersive theatre routinely engages in this forensic process of de-

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<sup>32</sup> Gareth White, 'On Immersive Theatre', *Theatre Research International* 37.3 (October 2012), 221-35.

and reconstruction, it is less routine for that process itself to be deconstructed in the course of the immersive event. From the opening efforts of the bibliophile to piece narrative together to the closing gag of the telescopes that aid but trick our vision, we are confronted at every playful turn with echoes of our own efforts to make sense of the evidence. Along the way, the augmentation and peeling back of the Cathedral architecture alternately suspends us in illusion and detaches us. Maps and models of city and Cathedral—a city and Cathedral like but not quite like Liverpool—emplace and jolt us at the same time, locating us uncannily. I found myself thinking about those listed buildings bulldozed by the developers of Liverpool One, but also—a bit like Dante—about my desire for illusion. Sharps exploits the Cathedral's resistance to appropriation as much as he exploits its aura. The show's tropes of revelation and obfuscation invoke dialogue between adaptation and refusal to adapt.

There are strong thematic and conceptual parallels between *One Step Forward* and Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1980). The ludic text-spaces created by Eco are themselves literary equivalents of immersive theatre—reflexive, unfinished stories that call playfully on the reader to complete them. Action and meaning in Eco's novel are generated through a lost and possibly suppressed text—Aristotle's book on comedy. The reader must generate meaning for themselves by acting as detective. The key site is a library (conflating lost and mythical libraries from Borges and elsewhere), and there are poisoned pages from which the words disappear. The two hexagonal rooms in *One Step Forward* recall the complex of hexagonal galleries that make up the library in *Name of the Rose*. Eco states in his Postscript that he chose the title 'because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it

hardly has any meaning left'.<sup>33</sup> Something similar could be said of Santa Claus. As in Eco's novel, the palimpsestic nature of the *One Step Forward* philosophers' efforts to form text mirrors the palimpsestic nature of the event we are participating in, our own efforts to form/restore text.

### Immersion in the Wake of the Divine

There is another reason why both the *Divine Comedy* and *Name of the Rose*, with their respective emphases on spiritual questing in relation to theological institutions, are useful reference-points. In siting *One Step Forward* in a cathedral, Sharps brings into view the related functions of immersive theatre, museums and places of worship. The characterization of traditional Western museums as mausolea, or shrines, is summarized by Janet Marstine:

One of the longest-standing and most traditional ways to envision the museum is as a sacred space [...] In the paradigm of the shrine, the museum has therapeutic potential. It is a place of sanctuary removed from the outside world. Museum collections are fetishized; the museum as shrine declares that its objects possess an aura that offers spiritual enlightenment as it inspires Platonic values of beauty and morality.<sup>34</sup>

*One Step Forward* invokes the 'therapeutic potential' of the museum and the auratic nature of objects from both spiritual (sacred) *and* material (sacrilegious)

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<sup>33</sup> Umberto Eco, *Name of the Rose* (London: Harcourt, 1984), p.502.

<sup>34</sup> Janet Marstine (ed.), *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p.9.

perspectives. As Bruno Latour has argued, there is something deeply sacrilegious about the museum that is traditionally repressed. Although the 'critical acumen' deployed in setting up the museum 'depends on a clear distinction between what is real and what is constructed', the museum positions the objects it collects as cultural, not natural—fetishes, idols, vanities—usurping nature in what Marstine calls 'Platonic' fashion.<sup>35</sup> The problem for the museologist, as Latour asserts, is that s/he must act as God. It is a problem intensified within the paradigm of the new museum, where all kinds of trickery is used to blur the virtual and the actual, resurrecting the dead through simulation. In *One Step Forward*, this traditionally repressed problem is brought into view: the notion of acting in place of God is hard to miss as we discover buried supermarkets and miniature offices and cathedrals looking like models of cities suspended in time. The pathos of our production and consumption clashes with the effortless aura of the sacred space. We are frequently reminded, nonetheless, that this sacred, awe-inspiring space was actually constructed by human hands. dreamthinkspeak's dialogue with the Cathedral is propelled by hope: the transmission of culture, and how we choose to legitimate that transmission, is entirely in our hands.

In the death of grand narratives that led us to the uncertainties of postmodernism, the death of God is fundamental. It is perhaps not surprising that the aura 'lost from the postmodern artefact' is restored through simulations in, say, disused warehouses that offer a sense of wonder and power that might previously have been felt in a

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<sup>35</sup> Bruno Latour, 'A Few Steps toward an Anthropology of the Iconoclastic Gesture', *Science in Context*, 10.1 (1997), 63-83 (p.63).

cathedral. Long before there was 'neoliberalism', capitalism has been compensating for and accelerating the death of God by promising god-like empowerment through simulation. In his 1948 autobiography, *Seven Storey Mountain*—the title of which refers to the *Divine Comedy*—former Trappist monk Thomas Merton rails against the appetite for the spectacular stimulated and indulged by modern capitalism:

We live in a society whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible, in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and printing presses and movie studios and all the rest.<sup>36</sup>

'Synthetic' is an interesting word. It has two definitions that evolved in tandem: (*in reference to substances*) imitation of the natural through human agency; (*in reference to propositions*) having truth or falsity determinable with recourse to experience. These definitions make Merton's use of the word 'synthetic' seem prescient, resonating as they do with the claims made by some critics and makers for immersive performance. According to these claims, submerging oneself in a simulated reality paradoxically allows the participant to recover a state of embodied agency that has been eviscerated by a cultural diminution of experience. Agency, according to this logic, is revived by deduction through experience. Sharps takes a more Mertonian line. The shifts of perspective, epistemological jolts, epiphanal moments and other lacunae he builds into his product aim to open a space *between* desire and product. This space is a chance to reflect on the paradoxes of the

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harvest, 1999), p.148.

forensic age, a stage of capitalist desire-fulfilment in which experience is about closing down space, about moving through it in a fugue-like bubble.

From a Mertonian perspective, the products catering for today's 'synthetic passions' might include interactive, multi-media experiences offered in contemporary museums and immersive performance events by the likes of Punchdrunk. Ironically but logically in Merton's scenario, 'movie studios' are (like 'factories and printing presses') fast becoming things of yesterday, their products increasingly nostalgic. These passions of yesterday are 'synthetically' recovered within new-museological, interactive, multi-media experiences. Movie studios feature in several Punchdrunk shows, including *It Felt Like a Kiss*<sup>37</sup> and *The Drowned Man*. The latter is set within and around Temple Pictures, a fictional British outpost of real, Hollywood film corporation Republic Pictures.

While we are literally and metaphorically masked within Punchdrunk's blurring of illusion and reality, we are, repeatedly, unmasked within *One Step Forward*. All of the images we encounter—including the shamed Santas ordering and wrapping our gifts and the philosophers struggling to make sense from the scraps of culture—conspire to reflect back to us the consequences of our desires, aspirations, vanities and struggles. How we interpret those reflections is up to us, but at least we have time and space *to* reflect, and are guided to consider meaningful questions about desire, preservation and regeneration. *OSF* is the kind of diversion of the forensic

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<sup>37</sup> *It Felt Like a Kiss* was a Punchdrunk collaboration with film-maker Adam Curtis and musicians Damon Albarn and The Kronos Quartet which took place in 2009, in the disused former home of the National Probation Office.

turn that can, in a modest but important way, both catalyse civic responsibility and enrich critical thinking about performance and participation. It challenges us, as citizens, makers and consumers, to illuminate what makes us reach, what constrains our reach, and what our aspirations leave behind.

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